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## New uses for old languages

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# New Uses for Old Languages

Paul Black

## 1. Introduction

The Australian television series *Unknown Australia* recently spoke of the Northern Territory as being ‘where an ancient people cling to a way of life 40,000 years old.’ For some reason many Australians like to think of Aboriginal people in just this way, even though most are now wearing western clothes, living in western style houses, and participating to a great extent in a western style economy. It would be just as fair to characterise non-Aboriginal Australians as ‘clinging’ to ways of life one or two thousand years old, at least, because many of their social, political, and religious practices go back that far—and we seldom know for sure which Aboriginal practices go back much further than this.

As the Aboriginal writer Colin Johnson (1985: 21) put it, the notion of

a stone-age culture (static and unchanging) is a myth created by those who should have known better and still put forth by those who should know better. All societies and cultures change and adapt, and this is fact not theory.

As Aboriginal lifestyles change, Aboriginal languages must change with them or they will increasingly be put aside in favour of a language that can cope with the new circumstances.

This may seem to make language and culture maintenance a paradox: what can it mean to ‘maintain’ something that must either change or go out of use? We’ll return to this question at the end of this chapter, after considering in more detail what it means for Aboriginal languages to adapt to new uses.

## 2. The New Uses and Their Effects

Many Aboriginal languages have already died out, of course, but those still spoken in dozens of communities across northern and central Australia are being used for a variety of new purposes. The language situation at Kintore, in the Northern Territory, seems typical. As described by Amery (1986: 15-18), the local Pintupi/Luritja language is used not only in connection with more traditional activities, such as hunting, ceremonies, and everyday camp life, but also in the local clinic, school, church and store, for council meetings, card playing, and discussing Aboriginal art business, and even for long distance communication over two-way radio. In such locations as Alice Springs Aboriginal languages have also been used in broadcast radio for over a decade and are being used in videos and for occasional television broadcasts.

Such new uses can actually affect the language itself. Most obviously they often require new vocabulary. They can also involve new discourse patterns and may require the relatively new medium of writing, and this can have less obvious effects on the structure of the language.

Let's consider some examples. Clinics in many communities now depend heavily on Aboriginal health workers, who generally interact with patients in the local language. Amery (1986: 23-24) notes that this not only involves much new vocabulary relating to diseases and treatments, but also that it can lead to less traditional patterns of interaction as the health workers adopt Western practices in asking more direct questions in taking a medical history.

Local government meetings often deal with western institutions and resource management, and they may thus bring new topics and vocabulary to the community.

The pattern of discourse may also be somewhat different. As a specific example, a few years ago there was a day long meeting in Galiwin'ku (on Elcho Island) about whether tourism should be introduced to the island. The meeting was held in a public area outdoors, with the audience strung out in quite a wide circle. Speakers took turns coming to a microphone in the centre of the circle and stating their case for or against tourism. There was little or no interaction with the audience, which did not, for example, ask questions. The meeting was not run in a western style, but there clearly were some less traditional elements, such as the use of the microphone. And at the end, a few people circulated around the audience to record people's vote on whether or not they wanted the proposed tourist facilities—surely not a traditional practice.

Church services in Aboriginal communities are often partly in English and partly in the local language. When I attended a Catholic mass on Bathurst Island, for example, much of the liturgy was in English, but the sermon was delivered in the local Tiwi language. (The speaker referred to written notes, whether in English or Tiwi.) The hymns were also in Tiwi, and to aid the memory an overhead projector was used to project the written lyrics against a wall in a front corner of the church. The hymns, some scripture and other church literature are also available in book form. Prayers are sometimes also said in Tiwi. In Wadeye (formerly Port Keats) people use the local Murrinh-Patha language for prayer both at mass—where *Yile dingarrayepup kathu* is the local equivalent of 'Lord hear our prayer'—and more privately (Br. Vince Roche, personal communication). The literature and the oral sermons, hymns, and prayers represent new genres of language use, although some of them (such as sermons) may well be similar to more traditional genres. They also involve many new concepts as well as expressions that become endowed with special meaning, such as Koko-Bera *ngerr wethárr*, the 'good news' of the gospel.

Broadcasting in Aboriginal languages is quite different from other language use in that the broadcaster cannot see the listeners, or generally even be sure who is listening. It is thus very different from talking to a group of friends or relatives. Since the broadcaster can't be sure how much the audience already knows, and since they can't ask for clarification, the language needs to be relatively decontextualized, i.e. self-contained. Broadcasting can also cover a wide variety of topics, whether relatively traditional or modern, and the latter may involve the use of new vocabulary. Because it can reach so many people broadcasting can actually play a crucial role in promoting new vocabulary and language standards in general; see Poulson, Ross, Shopen, and Toyne (1986). Broadcasting can also make use of writing, such as for notes on news or announcements.

In school programs the role of Aboriginal languages can vary from being the object of study for a hour or two per week to being one of the main media of instruction, normally along with English in what is thus a bilingual program. We'll consider bilingual programs at some length because of their impact on the children and hence the transmission of culture, and also because some readers may wonder if their benefits justify their cost.

### 3. The Case of Bilingual Education

Some thirty bilingual programs have been operating in recent years in Aboriginal communities in northern and central Australia. The following list is based on Bubb (1990) for Northern Territory communities and on Black (1983) and M. Gale (forthcoming) for programs in other locations.

Language

Locations (and year started)

Arrernte (Aranda)	Yipirinya School in Alice Springs (1983), Ltyentye Purte (Santa Teresa, NT) (1989)
Burarra	Maningrida, NT (1986)
Dhuwaya and others	Yirkala, NT (1974)
Djambarrpuynu	Galiwin'ku, NT (1974)
Gupapuyngu	Milingimbi, NT (1973)
Kukatja	Balgo Hills, WA (about 1987)
Luritja	Haasts Bluff (1974), M'Bunghara (1981), Papunya (1984), & Watiyawanu, NT (1981)
Manyjiljarra	Strelley, WA
Maung	Warruwi, NT (1973)
Murrinh-Patha	Wadeye, NT (1976)
Ndjébbana	Maningrida, NT (1981)
Ngaanyatjarra	Warburton, WA (mid 1970s only)
Nyangumarta	Strelley, WA
Pintupi/Luritja	Walungurru, NT (1983)
Pitjantjatjara	Ernabella and other S.A. communities (since the 1960s), Areyonga (1973) & Docker River, NT (1979), Yipirinya School in Alice Springs (1983)
Thayorre	Edward River, Qld (discontinued)
Tiwi	Nguiu, NT (1974)
Walmajarri	Noonkanbah, WA (briefly after 1980)
Warlpiri	Lajamanu (1982), Nyirrpi (1986), Willowra (1977), & Yuendumu, NT (1974)
Wik-Mungkan	Aurukun, Qld (suspended)

Nowadays bilingual education is often thought to be important for local language maintenance, but most of the programs were in fact started in order to improve the general education of the children. In most programs children begin schooling in their own language but over the next few years are taught increasingly in English, which typically comes to be used more than the local language by grade four. After less than a decade of operation, some such programs were indeed found to be more successful, in general academic terms, than the English-only programs that they replaced (Gale, McClay, Christie, & Harris, 1981; Murtagh, 1980).

The reasons for the effectiveness of bilingual education are not hard to imagine. Most obviously, it's much easier for children to learn in a language they understand than in one that they don't (see also Macnamara 1967). They can begin developing important academic skills, such as reading and writing, even before they are ready to learn much through the medium of spoken English. Many of the fundamentals they learn transfer readily to their later studies in English. In the area of literacy, for example, these fundamentals include such basics as the fact that books, unlike people, always 'tell the same story,' and that we read from left to right and from top to bottom. They also include most of the letters and punctuation required for English.

A well designed and properly staffed bilingual program can also make the students considerably more comfortable and confident about attending school (see also Cummins 1986). Even the fact that the local language is being used in written form can be a source of pride, allowing people to say, 'Now we are the same as white people—we can write our own language too' (Leeding, 1984: 11). On the other hand, to be confined to interaction in an alien language can be stifling:

the missionaries didn't realise that when they stopped us speaking Yolngu [i.e. Aboriginal] language in the school, they were stopping our way of thinking. How could we use our Yolngu thinking if school was run by Balanda [i.e. Europeans] with Balanda language? (Yunupingu 1989: 1).

As this passage suggests, the benefits of effective bilingual education come not just from the use of the local language in school, but also from who is there to use it. Such programs tend to depend on employing local people in professional capacities, at least as teaching assistants and literacy workers, but increasingly also as teachers and principals. This helps make both the children and the local community feel that the school is something of their own, rather than an alien and perhaps colonial institution. As Wunungmurra (1989: 13) says,

...Yolngu [i.e. Aboriginal people] must own the school program. Without this we will feel crushed and lose our self respect and self identity—we will be living on other people's programs like it was in the past, in the mission days.

Bilingual programs involve uses of Aboriginal language that differ considerably from traditional uses. The subject matter taught in the language often requires the development of new vocabulary. This includes some words required largely for academic purposes alone, such as ones relating to written language (e.g. 'letter', 'sentence', 'full stop') and mathematical concepts and processes (e.g. 'minus', 'fraction', 'set'). Furthermore, the teacher-pupil relationship can involve quite different patterns of oral language use than is otherwise normal in the community, and the development of a written version of the language tends to be especially important. Let's consider the discourse patterning and writing at more length before examining ways in which new vocabulary can arise.

#### 4. Discourse Patterning

Western-style schooling provides an especially fertile environment for speakers of Aboriginal languages to interact quite differently in their languages than they have in

the past. Even in western society the patterns of verbal interaction in schools tend to be rather different from those in non-school situations. Since teachers are expected to be in control of their classes, students are generally not allowed to talk whenever they wish, and in many circumstances they are expected to direct their talk only to the teacher, rather than to other students. Often the teacher-directed talk also falls into a 'question-answer-evaluation' pattern of exchange that is unusual outside of schools. Consider this example:

Teacher:       What's the capital of South Australia? Ken?

Student:       Adelaide.

Teacher:       Right!

Outside of classrooms (or quiz programs) we don't normally ask such 'display' questions, i.e. ones for which we already know the answer. To the extent that Aboriginal teachers follow such western practices in their own teaching they may be deviating even more severely from the normal patterns of exchange in their languages, where even an attempt to gain answers that one does not already know may involve less direct questioning than we might use in English. (See Eades' comments on questioning elsewhere in this book, and also Harris (1990: 38-39)).

Some other new patterns (or genres) of oral language were mentioned earlier, including hymns and prayers in church and the way Aboriginal health workers are coming to take medical histories. Some of these may be similar to more traditional genres, of course. For example, sermons and radio broadcasts are new to Aboriginal languages, but there were traditional situations in which people similarly spoke in a kind of 'broadcast' mode, rather than to particular individuals. Among the Koko-Bera (of western Cape York Peninsula) for example, such a broadcast mode was used as certain preparations were carried out following a person's death. One elder would have the responsibility of

speaking out, to nobody in particular, on the relevant obligations and taboos, such as how people should not visit the part of the country owned by the deceased. This was called *path-kun wíchirrm*—essentially ‘carrying the country of the deceased’ and translated into the local English as ‘preaching’.

The new uses of Aboriginal language may lead not only to new patterns of exchange but also to changes in the way in which respect and avoidance are signalled in language. People normally adjust their speech to suit the relationship between them and the other participants; in English this is what makes the difference between such pairs of sentences as ‘Shut up!’ and ‘Could you please be quiet?’ Relative age is often an important factor in this, and in English such factors as social position and occupation can also be important: we tend to speak in a bit different way to our doctor than to a taxi driver, for example. In Aboriginal cultures, on the other hand, how people speak to each other, and indeed whether they can speak to each other at all, has usually depended heavily on how they are related or classified as kin; see Alpher’s discussion in an earlier chapter. Some languages even had special ‘respect’ forms for use in the presence of certain kin (examples can be found in Haviland (1979)).

Consider what this means in relation to schooling. In a Western-style school an Aboriginal teacher may have to accept responsibilities over a class that are not in accord with expectations based on kinship. Aboriginal teachers undoubtedly find ways of coping with the situation, and it may also be that children of primary school age are not really expected to have mastered the appropriate ways to talk to and behave towards various kin. In any case, however, the school environment certainly provides more support for learning western style role relationships—e.g. teacher-student—than it does for mastering the kinship obligations.

It's thus not surprising that children do not seem to be mastering the appropriate behaviour towards kin in some communities. In both Kowanyama (on Cape York peninsula) and Nguiu (on Bathurst Island), for example, I have heard certain children described as exceptional precisely because of how conscientious they were about following the more traditional rules of behaviour. In addition it seems typical for special 'respect' forms of Aboriginal languages to go out of use much more quickly than the language as a whole. Undoubtedly such changes are promoted by a variety of changes in lifestyle and not solely by schooling.

## 5. The Impact of Writing

One of the most striking new uses for Aboriginal and Islander languages is their use in written form. As mentioned elsewhere in this book, some languages began to be written quite early in colonial times (as for example in the dictionary of the Adelaide language described by Simpson). But for many Aboriginal languages, a written form has come only in the last twenty or thirty years.

Much Aboriginal language writing has been for the purposes of early primary education in bilingual programs. This includes the preparation of primers, story books, and other classroom material as well as the writing of the children themselves. As noted earlier, this first language literacy has important academic and motivational benefits regardless of whether literacy in the language has any real functions outside the school. In some communities, nonetheless, Aboriginal language literacy is gradually coming to be used for a variety of purposes, ranging from occasional public notices to scripture and hymn books in church and sometimes even well-read newsletters in the community at large (see Rhydwen's comments elsewhere in this book, and also Goddard (1990)).

The introduction of literacy to a previously non-literate culture can have tremendous consequences. Writing is more than just a representation of spoken language: it is a tool for doing new things, such as communicating over distance or time and keeping records for posterity or simply to jog one's own memory. Nowadays such electronic devices as the telephone, radio, and tape recorder let us do many of the same things with spoken language, and yet all larger societies around the world still rely heavily on writing. It is a powerful medium, and it is thus accorded a special status in many societies. Western societies value written contracts over oral promises, for example, and the idea that the written word is safer or stronger than the spoken is a compelling one.

One may thus wonder about the effects of literacy on Aboriginal cultures, and whether it can cause changes in life style or ways of thinking that people might someday regret.

Two things make this somewhat an ideal question, however. Firstly, whether or not Aboriginal people become literate in their own languages, Australian schooling aims to ensure their literacy in English, and it seems clear that the effects of this literacy will not somehow be confined to some 'English' corner of the brain. Secondly, literacy is only one of a number of factors, including schooling and urbanisation, that are known to affect thought patterns; see the excellent study by Scribner and Cole (1981) for evidence on these matters.

It has sometimes been suggested that a reliance on literacy may inhibit oral story telling and thus interfere with the oral transmission of traditional stories. One may well be left with this impression by seeing young Aboriginal adults who have been schooled in the written language seek out written versions of traditional stories because they have not learned to tell the story properly themselves. But it is clear that oral traditions are also being lost in communities that have never had the benefit of literacy in their own languages or in some cases even in English, as I found during research on Kurtjar and

Koko-Bera language and traditions in southwestern Cape York Peninsula. It is not literacy that is killing off oral traditions.

Since written and spoken language serve different functions they often come to be noticeably different in structure and vocabulary, and written language also tends to be somewhat more conservative than speech. One might imagine that the conservatism would require many decades to develop, but in fact it has already begun to appear in written languages that are less than twenty years old. On Bathurst Island, for example, the school uses a much more conservative form of the local Tiwi language than the children actually speak (Black 1990b: 82). Similarly, younger Yolngu Matha speakers in Yirrkala are certainly writing a more conservative form of the language than the so-called 'Baby Gumatj' (or Dhuwaya) many of them actually speak (see Amery forthcoming). Cataldi (1990: 84) has noted how a similar conservatism in written Warlpiri in Lajamanu can be seen as a positive factor in support of language maintenance.

## 6 Sources for New Vocabulary

As we noted earlier, using Aboriginal languages in new ways often requires new vocabulary: words for products and prices in the local shop, for medicines and treatments in the clinic, for the processes and subject matter of education in the school, and so on. English is similarly gaining new words and expressions all the time. When Europeans first came to live in Australia, for example, they borrowed such words as *billabong* and *boomerang* and coined such others as *paperbark* and *platypus* in order to talk about their new situation and experiences. In the same way the Aboriginal people borrowed or coined words for things that were old in Western culture but new to theirs, such as types of food, drink, and clothing. Since that time both English and Aboriginal languages have also gained new words for a variety of innovations that we take for granted today, such as the aeroplane, electricity, motor vehicle, radio, refrigerator, telephone, and television. People sometimes take such things to represent change in Aboriginal traditions without noting that they represent change in Western traditions as well.

New vocabulary can be produced from the resources of the language itself or it can be borrowed from other languages. The simplest version of the former is to ‘extend’ the meaning of an existing word to cover a new concept, just as the meaning of English *bonnet* was extended to refer to the engine cover of a car. A well known Aboriginal example is the use of the word for ‘ghost’ or ‘spirit’ (e.g. *kardiya* in west central Northern Territory, *mánpich* in Koko-Bera) to refer also to white people. Other examples include the extension of Kurtjar *mook* ‘bone’ to mean ‘wheel’, of Yolngu Matha *mákirri* or *buthuru* ‘ears’ to refer to the dots above the Yolngu Matha letter *ä* (which represents long *aa*), and of Tiwi *yinjanga* ‘name’ to also mean ‘number’.

New vocabulary can also be created as a combination of old elements. One possibility is to extend an old word to cover a new meaning, as described above, but also to qualify the word by another whenever necessary to distinguish the new meaning from the old. Thus the Kurtjar originally referred to horses as *ruaak* ‘dog(s)’ or more distinctively as *ruaak ngkuaath* ‘big dog(s)’, and to sugar as *loongkird* ‘sand’ or more precisely as *maay loongkird* ‘sand food’. Another possibility is to make a compound expression in which both (or all) elements must always occur. Thus the Warumungu of central Australia came to refer to the rabbit as *kuwarta junmarn* ‘long ears’ (Simpson 1985: 16). It’s also possible to derive new vocabulary by adding affixes to familiar words, as in Warumungu *jina-kari* (foot-belong) for ‘shoe’, *warli-kari* (thigh-belong) for ‘trousers’, and *kunapa-jangu* (dog-having) for ‘Greyhound bus’ (Simpson 1985: 15).

Aboriginal languages have also drawn on English (or in some cases an English-based pidgin or creole) for much new vocabulary: e.g. Pitjantjatjara *rayipula* ‘rifle’, *mutuka* ‘motor car’, *turawutja* ‘trousers’, *tjaata* ‘shirt’, and *pulangkita* ‘blanket’ (Amery 1986: 19). As these examples show, the words are often pronounced in a way that that conforms to the normal sound pattern of the language but which is rather different from the original English pronunciation.

English is not the only source of borrowing. Languages generally tend to borrow occasional words from their neighbours, and in Australia these have sometimes been words for newly introduced concepts. For example, Warumungu *murrkkarti* ‘hat’ seems to have originally come from the Kurna language, far to the south (Simpson 1985: 19). The languages along the coast of Arnhem Land have also borrowed words from the Macassan language of Indonesia in the past few hundred years: e.g. Yolngu Matha *jorra* ‘paper’, and *rrupiya* ‘money’.

Speakers of some languages are anxious to keep their languages as free of foreign influences as possible. Thus the Germans went through a period of casting out words derived from Latin or Greek, such as *hydrogen*, and replacing them by Germanic compounds, in this case *Wasserstoff* (i.e. ‘water-stuff’, for hydrogen). The French have also legislated against the use of foreign vocabulary. Some Torres Strait Islanders I have worked with have also been concerned about keeping their languages as pure as possible by building new vocabulary out of traditional elements. At the same time speakers of languages as diverse as English, Albanian, Filipino and Japanese have happily borrowed some fifty percent or more of their vocabularies from various other languages—notably French, Latin, and Greek in the case of English. The fact that such a ‘mongrel’ language as English grew from the speech of a sometime colonized island to a language of international importance demonstrates that borrowing itself is not a threat to the existence of a language. Language ‘purity’ is largely a matter of personal, or societal, preference.

## 7. The Paradox of Language and Culture Maintenance

Nowadays many people are concerned with maintaining Aboriginal cultures and languages; see for example Devlin (1990), Schmidt (1990) and McConvell (1991). However, this can’t mean ‘freezing’ the culture or language at some point in time, whether at the time of first European contact or at the present. As a culture or language stops keeping up with the on-going changes in daily life it becomes increasingly less useful and less likely to survive. To ‘maintain’ a culture or language it seems that you often have to let it change or even help it change. As Poulson, Ross, Shopen and Toyne (1986, p. 7) note, ‘A major aspect of cultural maintenance is the adaptation of language to talking about new things.’

If cultures and languages must necessarily change, however, what does it mean to ‘maintain’ them? As Harris (1990: 39-44) points out, Aboriginal culture will change, but it need not lose its distinctiveness. Perhaps one can identify a variety of characteristics that are currently distinctive of Aboriginal culture, as Harris (1990: 21-39) does. But which characteristics are important to maintain is a matter for Aboriginal people to work out among themselves. To a great extent, cultural demise is simply cultural change that is unwanted by the people involved, perhaps often because is forced upon them from outside (see Black 1990b).

Aboriginal people certainly seem happy to absorb many Western ideas into their cultures, as long as they do it on their own terms. With respect to education Wäli Wunungmurra (1989: 12-13) pointed out that Aboriginal and Western knowledge

will only come together if there is respect for our knowledge and where Aboriginal people are taking the initiative, where we shape and develop the educational programs and then implement them. In other words Yolngu [i.e. Aboriginal people] must own the school program.

However Aboriginal people decide to maintain their cultures, their languages will have to remain in step if they hope to maintain them too. For promoting language maintenance, Fishman (1987: 14-15) stresses the importance of making sure that it is used in all primary aspects of daily life, such as the home, the school, and the workplace, and to whatever extent possible even to promote its use in the ‘secondary institutions of intergenerational mother tongue continuity’; see also Black (1990a). As McConvell (1984: 51-52) puts it, the language should

grow in the hands of Aboriginal people themselves, to challenge the domination of English not in everything, but in the situations [in which] the people themselves feel capable of putting up the alternative.

### **For Discussion**

1. The chapter focuses on Aboriginal languages, but many other languages also develop new uses with the passing of time. How many new uses of English can you think of that have developed within the last century or two? As starters you might consider where these bits of English are from: (a) Roger, over and out; (b) Number please; (c) And now a word from our sponsor. As these examples may suggest, you can also consider to what extent the new uses have given rise to distinctive patterns of speech.
  
2. One reason given for having bilingual education is that people learn better in their first language. Even so, many children throughout the world have had to get their schooling through a second language. Sometimes they seem to do this quite successfully, one known case being children of English speaking background studying through French in Quebec. Can you see reasons why such ‘mainstream’ students might tend to be more successful than minority students in studying through the medium of a different language?
  
3. The chapter says that writing is ‘more’ than just a representation of spoken language, but this should not be to suggest that spoken language is any less important than writing. List as many things as you can that are (a) best done through speech and (b) best done through writing. For example, to which list would you add (1) communicating in the dark, and (2) stating a complicated mathematical formula? Think about the properties of speech and writing that cause you to add each item to one list or the other.
  
4. With regard to the relation between literacy and thought patterns, some scholars have claimed that there are actually deep psychological differences between literate and non-literate people, although Scribner and Cole (1981: 251-525) found

no evidence that this was so. What sorts of evidence might one hope to find to confirm or reject such a possibility?

5. The chapter claims that borrowing should not be considered a threat to languages. Some scholars would disagree, and they might point out that the situation of Aboriginal languages is far different from such international languages as English. What arguments can you find for and against such a view?

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